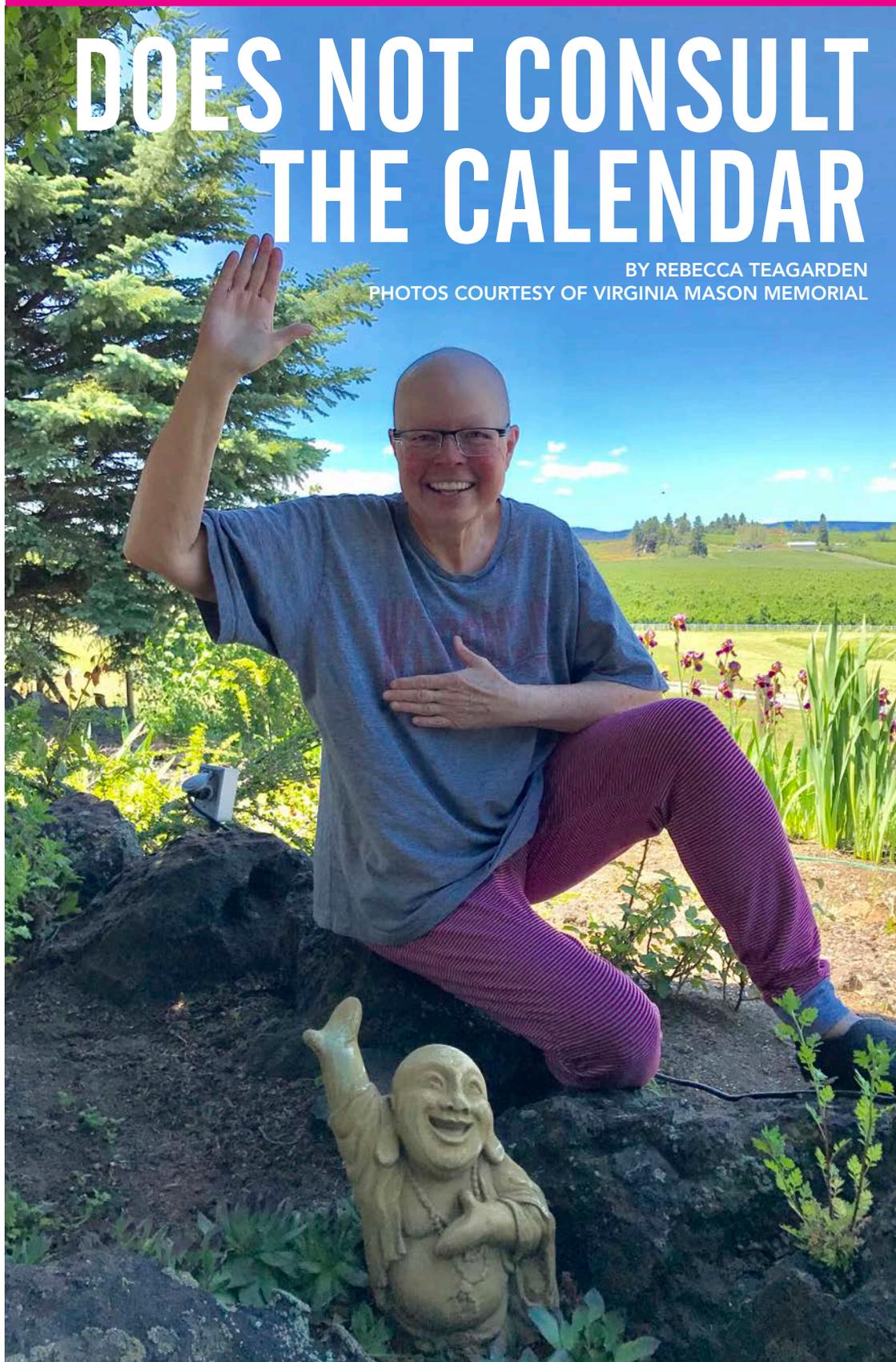




CANCER

DOES NOT CONSULT THE CALENDAR

BY REBECCA TEAGARDEN
PHOTOS COURTESY OF VIRGINIA MASON MEMORIAL



MELVA TORRES gently unfolds a long sheet of crinkled tissue paper. It looks like the kind they use to wrap the exam table at the doctor's office, except this one is covered in the hieroglyphics of cancer. And that's exactly what it is.

"Dr. Jones wrote it all down for me," Melva says. "Then she drew pictures of my tumors so I could have an idea about the sizes. I am blessed that she is my doctor." Melva carefully refolds and stores this very personal map of her breast cancer and its treatment by oncologist Vicky Jones and the staff at North Star Lodge Cancer Care.

"I was too young to be getting an annual mammogram, but I do my own self-exams and I felt a lump," says Melva, age 40. "Johnnie said, 'You go in.'"

Johnnie is Melva's husband. And at that moment, on July 19, 2016, they had been married not quite two months. They also had two kids at home and two grandchildren. Melva was also working full-time as the sales manager at K&K Custom Furniture and, after her shift, she worked out, usually five times a week. "When they said I had breast cancer I just cried. I thought I was going to die. When we left the office I told my husband I wanted to divorce him; I was going to die and he should move on. "He said, 'I took my vows with you, and I'm going to be here until the end.' After that I thought, God, take me where you need me to go."

Terry Martin got the news just two weeks after receiving her first retirement check. She spent 30 years as an English professor at Central Washington University, and on September 24, 2016 — came the bad mammogram. "How lucky that I go in for my mammogram each year," she says.

Today, though, she has just finished radiation treatments following five months of chemotherapy. "I'm going to hit the reset button and start over," she says from the most comfortable chair in her living room, with views of orchards and rolling hills. "I've already got plane tickets for 2018: Mexico and Costa Rica." Terry, 60, chooses her words carefully. She is a writer. So during her treatment year that's what she did. Friends and family got regular updates about her journey through cancer and life with her spouse, Jane (who, herself had breast cancer 15 years ago).

Terry Martin lost her hair, but not her sense of humor as she mimics the pose of a smiling Buddha.



Terry before diagnosis. She says "This has changed me in ways I don't even understand yet. I find myself in a sorority I never meant to pledge."



40-year-old Melva Torres was too young to be getting an annual mammogram, and found a lump doing a self-exam. At the time, she had been married not quite two months.

She is now on a post-treatment course of Herceptin. Both women had a lumpectomy, surgery to remove the tumor and some of the normal tissue that surrounds it.

"Dr. (John) Kisala (at Cascade Surgical Partners) did my surgeries," says Melva. "He is awesome: He came out and told me, 'There was no evidence of cancer cells.' I bawled my head off, and he said, 'I'm so glad I could make somebody happy today.'"

And, yes, both women lost their hair during therapy.

Melva started chemo on Oct. 21, 2016, and her long, curly hair began coming out in clumps almost immediately. "My dad said to me, 'I want you to cut your hair so you can get it made into a wig.' I told him, 'No, it's too expensive.' But he didn't want to hear it. He said, 'Your hair means so much to you. It is you.'"

Terry, meanwhile, runs her hand across her head and says, bemused, "I'm at the stage between dryer lint and dust bunny."

Support came in many forms for each of the women. Artist friends filled Terry's life with their creativity. "But they also understood about my need to hole up and hunker down. Jane, though, walked every step of it with me. I'd done that for her. We know how to show up for each other in that way."

Terry's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 46 and she died at 54. Terry says though she felt her mother's presence, she had to remember that she was living her own story, and not repeating the past. She had a lot of help.

"I felt very held through the whole process, and it's not just North Star; that kind of care started at `Ohana. I really trusted my doctors and the staff. I love Dr. (Vicky) Jones and Dr. (Cheryl) Davison; I like smart women who are good at what they do. And my surgeon, Peter Young (at Cascade Surgical Partners). I felt I was in such skilled hands."

Terry adds, "This has changed me in ways I don't even understand yet. I find myself in a sorority I never meant to pledge. It's great to have this year over. Hope. That's my word for this year. I just held hope for the whole thing."

Here's Terry's most recent email:
"Hi, guys.

When I met with my oncologist yesterday I asked her whether at this point I can say "I had cancer." After all, I didn't know I had it when all this began, so how can I believe I don't have it now, right?

She said while they've gotten everything they could see, and zapped the hell out of any areas likely to have microscopic traces, using the past tense like this wouldn't really be accurate. What I can say is that I have had cancer, and that I am now in remission.

So that's where we are. And it feels good enough.

That said, I don't have to go back to see her for three months. For now, I'll have just one medical appointment a month or so (Oct: mammogram, Nov: surgeon, Dec: oncologist, Jan: radiologist, etc.) which feels like heaven to me."

From diagnosis at `Ohana Mammography Center to treatment at North Star, Melva and Terry know one thing for sure: Cancer does not consult the calendar.

She went from pages of blank space on her calendar to one filled with medical appointments, says Terry. "I'd never even had surgery before. It really changed the pace of my life. But I didn't get real scared, and I was surprised about that. I really tried to stay in the moment, but it's a pretty tough balancing act, taking it one day at a time and holding hope."

Shortly after diagnosis Melva discovered that she

was pregnant. "We talked to Dr. Jones right away. We were scared, but she said, 'We're going to take care of this. We'll get this done.'" Unfortunately, however, Melva miscarried.

Terry had invasive ductal carcinoma; late stage and in three sites. Melva's form of the disease was more aggressive.

"When they said I had breast cancer I just cried. I thought I was going to die...."

- Melva Torres

See a video of survivor Melva Torres and her cancer-care team at:
<http://northstarlodge.org/ittakesateam>